# Wrestling Observer Newsletter

*PO Box 1228, Campbell, CA 95009-1228 ISSN10839593* *History of Portland Wrestling*

DECEMBER 16, 1991

This past Sunday, KPTV, Ch. 12 in Portland, OR, announced the cancellation of "Portland Wrestling," a Saturday night institution throughout the state of Oregon for the past 38 years. The final episode of Portland Wrestling will run on 12/28. The program, which had a history of strong ratings and a cult following, fell victim to high production costs (which the station was paying for) and declining ratings in the wake of television oversaturation and declining interest in pro wrestling. On Monday in The Oregonian, Portland promoter Don Owen said that he didn't know if the cancellation would signal the end of the promotion. Owen Promotions is the oldest active wrestling company in North America, and probably the world, dating back to the mid-1920s when it was founded by Don's father, Herb Owen. Don Owen, who was the last surviving member of the old-guard of NWA wrestling promoters, started as a ring announcer for his father in 1931. This past Saturday night, the cancellation of the show was acknowledged throughout the show by announcer Don Coss, who asked fans to write letters to KPTV, thanking them for 40 years of running weekly wrestling on television. Nobody bad-mouthed the station (which probably would have been edited off the air) and Coss' asking for letters accentuated writing positive letters, although it was clearly a last-ditch effort to get the station to change its mind. During the show, in just about every interview, it was said that even though wrestling is scheduled to go off the air, that there would continue to be live wrestling every Saturday night at the Portland Sports Arena, a converted bowling alley owned by Owen. Although crowds in recent weeks had topped 800 fairly often, the crowd this past Saturday fell off to just a few hundred. One wonders how long a regular nightly circuit can continue without a television show. While most feel the 79-year-old Owen will at least attempt to continue to run without television, it seems a longshot at best that he'll be able to continue for any length of time except perhaps the Saturday night shows since Owen owns the building thus keeps all concession revenue. Owen didn't pay KPTV for the show, but the station provided the production personnel and equipment. There were several factors involved in the cancellation according to an article in Monday's Oregonian. The main factor was the steadily declining ratings in recent years. In addition, the station was planning on leasing some of its production facilities and didn't want to maintain a commitment for every Saturday night. A third reason was the financial problems encountered by the show's sponsor, Tom Peterson. With Peterson, an appliance store operator who was also a cult figure in Portland since the 1950s, filing Chapter 11 bankruptcy, the show was without a sponsor. An additional reason was negotiations KPTV has had with both World Championship Wrestling and the World Wrestling Federation (which already runs one of its tapes on Saturday morning on the station) to supply them with tapes to put in the time slot, which would mean it could continue to broadcast wrestling on Saturday night's with the bigger name stars and without the expense of producing the show. While Owen may be able to continue drawing a few hundred hardcores weekly on Saturday nights without television, the lack of television would make it almost impossible to interest new fans in his product and would make it nearly impossible to continue running a full schedule of spot shows. Without the spot shows, which will clearly dwindle down to nothing before the traditional Saturday night Portland crowds will, it will be impossible to use any wrestlers except those who already live in the area and have regular jobs, and just wrestle a time or two per week as a moonlighting job. There are enough wrestlers who have settled in the area and have regular jobs to where that is feasible, but this would seem to eliminate the idea of wrestlers coming in to gain experience, which was the main value to the pro wrestling business at large of a regional territory such as this one in 1991. If Owen Promotions does close up fully, or simply cuts its schedule back to weekly shows, it would leave the Tennessee-based Jarrett Promotions as the final full-time territory to survive the fall-out of the national expansion of the WWF and WCW from more than 30 offices a decade ago.

With the demise of the next-to-the-last of the full-time regional offices, the problem of where to find new talent becomes even greater. Right now the problem isn't as severe as it could be since the WWF is pretty much considered the place to go by most wrestlers, so they can eventually siphon off the young American talent that has been lucky enough to get regular work in Japan and gain experience in that way. WCW has taken another route, basically taking tall bodybuilders right out of the gym with no experience and attempting to push them as new stars, although its attempts to do so have largely been major failures. The situation isn't quite desperate yet, but both WWF and WCW have to consider the feasibility of supporting a farm system of sorts using veterans who are stale nationwide to teach green newcomers the ropes until they're ready to "explode" on the national scene. It's the lack of these new stars with enough ring savvy to make things fresh that is part of the reason both groups are having so much trouble drawing right now, because the vast majority of talent isn't fresh.

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JUNE 8, 1992

The man who has almost surely been involved in the pro wrestling business longer than anyone in the history of this profession called it quits Saturday night. Don Owen, the 80-year-old promoter of pro wrestling in Oregon made a tearful announcement before just 80 fans at the Portland Sports Arena that the 5/30 show would be his last as a promoter. Saturday ended 68

years of involvement in pro wrestling by Owen, who started out as a teenager helping out his father, Herb Owen, back in 1925, when Babe Ruth and Ty Cobb ruled baseball, Jack Dempsey and Strangler Lewis were the kings in boxing and wrestling respectively, the NFL was a fledgling barnstorming league and the NBA was more than two decades away from being formed. Owen and brother Elton Owen took over Oregon territory after their father passed away, and Don became the main man as the years went by. It seemed inevitable when Owen was unable to land a new television station after long-time station KPTV canceled his Saturday night "Portland Wrestling" show at the end of 1991, that it would spell the end for the man who called himself "the last of the mohicans" in his farewell speech. However, the timing of it came as a surprise to almost everyone involved, although it was expected it would occur. The retirement of Owen doesn't spell an end to the Oregon regional circuit, as Sandy Barr, who had run most of the spot towns in recent years along with being a referee in Portland, will be taking over with help of son Jesse Barr.

The timing of the retirement was most likely due to it being a choice over whether Owen would continue as promoter, but with no television and no future, or whether he would turn it over to Barr, who had worked out a Japanese deal and a television deal which gave the promotion at least hopes for a breath of new life. Owen was gracious in talking about Barr, who had been maneuvering behind-the-scenes to get full control of the circuit, which will be renamed "Championship Wrestling USA." Barr is very close to a deal with Ch. 32 in Portland, which would improve the local television coverage from the public access station in Portland which saw crowds dwindle from a few hundred a week down below 100 in recent weeks, even with kids allowed in free. Owen blamed his departure, in cryptic terms, on the problems that Tom Peterson (the long-time sponsor of the program who declared bankruptcy in 1991) suffered, and attempting to compete with the WWF. The WWF had offered Ch. 12 its syndicated show to air in place of the Portland Wrestling show on Saturday night which inevitably spelled the doom for Owen. KPTV had been paying the weekly production costs for Portland Wrestling and without Peterson's sponsorship and with the decline in television ratings, it made the show a losing proposition for the station. The negotiations with the WWF for the slot made the decision easier because the station could keep airing pro wrestling in the traditional late Saturday night time slot. Basically Owen said that he could no longer compete with the big boys and he's had a great run and it was time to step aside. When announcing Barr as the new promoter, with Barr then announcing his retirement as referee, Owen said, "I hope Sandy can make a go of it because I don't want to see our style of wrestling die." The few regulars who were still attending were very emotional during his goodbye speech.

Barr's first official card was on 6/1 in Portland. As reported here last week, Barr and son Jesse reached a deal a few weeks back to work out a talent exchange agreement with the newly-formed Oriental Pro Wrestling promotion in Japan headed by Ryuma Go. Go and Masahiko Takasugi, two long-time Japanese journeymen wrestlers along with Go's protege, Matti Irakura, will be working as regulars in Oregon and the Oregon talent will become regulars when Oriental Pro Wrestling runs its tours, with the first one tentatively scheduled for next month. Barr, with the Japanese connection, told Japanese reporters that the only way to compete locally against the WWF would be by running a Japanese style promotion. To that end, the matches on Saturday night were all very long with a solid wrestling product, with a five match show lasting from 8:30 to 11:15 with few delays in between matches because the bouts went 20 to 35 minutes each.

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AUGUST 12, 2002

In every part of the country, there was one person who more than anyone else, signified regional pro wrestling. In most cases, it was the local star, whether it be Dusty Rhodes in Florida, Ric Flair in the Carolinas, Bruno Sammartino in the Northeast, Jackie Fargo and later Jerry Lawler in Tennessee, Fred Blassie in Los Angeles or Ray Stevens in San Francisco.

A few promoters also fit that bill, most notably Paul Boesch in Texas because he doubled as the television announcer, or because they doubled as the top wrestling star, people like Bill Watts, Fritz Von Erich or Verne Gagne. But in Oregon, wrestlers came and went, and while many became pseudo-local celebrities because of the uniqueness of the territory, the fixture was Don Owen.

Owen, who passed away on 8/1 at the age of 90, had the longest reign of any pro wrestling promoter that ever lived, promoting a territory for 54 years. He debuted before the public as the ring announcer for his father's promotion in 1931. He promoted his final show at the converted bowling alley he purchased known as the Portland Sports Arena, in 1992. In doing so, Owen was the next to last (Jerry Jarrett being the last) promoter from the regional days of wrestling to survive.

Owen had a certain charm. He was just about the world's worst ring announcer, botching names, and imparting little excitement as compared to the way it's done today in boxing and wrestling. But that was typical of the folksy Portland Wrestling promotion. It was a crew of about a dozen wrestlers, who would appear on television every Saturday night and cut promos for six shows a week in small towns throughout the states of Oregon and Washington. Nobody got rich, but nobody starved. After Owen had left wrestling, he was one of the few promoters always mentioned fondly by those who worked for them, because he was a fair payoff man, with people like Ric Flair and Dory Funk Jr., the traveling world champions who made what was top dollar in wrestling in their heydays, always mentioning him in the same sentence with Sam Muchnick and Paul Boesch. Prelim wrestlers working similar regional circuits who struggled through life on $40 and $50 payoffs would come to Oregon and earn $600 to $900 per week, more if they were on top. Oregon was known as a place where everyone got a shot at being on top and nearly everyone got lengthy interview time to get themselves over. Known as a junior heavyweight territory early before the days of television, Owen

himself liked action and not slow heavyweights, so with rare exceptions, like the impressive 70s run of Apache Bull Ramos as the top heel draw, the territory was based around faster paced wrestling than most of the rest of the country at the time.

If one were to pick a model for what would be the perfect modern pro wrestling developmental territory, perhaps Owen's would fit the bill. In fact, when people would later describe to either WCW or WWF, when all the regionals were dead and the idea of finding and training new talent for the future was becoming an issue, the description of how to create such a territory was usually along the lines of Portland Wrestling or Stampede Wrestling (which had an even better track record of producing stars). Owen regularly gave newcomers that were jobbers elsewhere, their first break, including the original Gorgeous George.

Raymond Wagner, who was the biggest pro wrestling television star on a national basis before Hulk Hogan, started his gimmick in the late 40s of stalling in taking off his elaborate robes, made by his wife, which got tremendous heat playing before loggers and lumberjacks. Later he expanded it, changed his name, bleached his hair, and when wrestling in California when the promotion had national television, is the man credited for putting wrestling on the television landscape for good.

Others, like Curt Hennig, Bob Remus (who later became famous as Sgt. Slaughter) Jimmy Snuka, Roddy Piper (who achieved his first success in California but always remained loyal to Owen when he became a star), Adrian Adonis and Jesse Ventura (who got his first push and became a great interview as Jesse the Body), wound up as big successes in the industry. Others, like Buddy Rose, Dutch Savage, Stan Stasiak, Lonnie "Moondog" Mayne and "Tough" Tony Borne became local legends. Owen gave Maurice Vachon the nickname Mad Dog, which made his career. A large percentage of the major wrestling stars in the business from the 50s through the 70s at some point worked the circuit. The road trips weren't excruciating. With few wrestlers on the show, everyone worked long matches, as often prelim wrestles doubled as referees. Working before the same fans every week required wrestlers not to work patterned matches. The territory was always a mix of veterans who knew how to work and more athletic younger wrestlers who provided fireworks, and learned the art of working and doing an interview that brought people to the building next week.

In his last years as promoter, he was always crotchety and worrisome, never knowing how long he would operate and always worrying about the local economy. Yet he outlasted all the big talking and higher profile promoters who ran much larger territories.

Owen, who died of age related causes, started in the business, and ended, as no doubt the longest lasting ring announcer in history. His father, Herb Owen, had started promoting wrestling in Oregon in 1925 and their company ran 67 consecutive years running mostly the same cities every week. With the exception of the Lutteroth family and EMLL's run in Mexico (69 years and counting), the Owen family wrestling promotions were the longest running pro wrestling company in history. Don wrestled a little, before taking over the promotion from his father. He was planning on passing it over to his son, Barry, who had become his assistant, when the wrestling business changed. He was also known as a rancher, raising cattle.

Owen was born on March 16, 1912 in Pendelton, OR. He started out in wrestling at the age of 13, setting up chairs and working concessions. Before graduating college at the University of Oregon, he was working full-time for his father. He ended up running the territory as well as running a successful cattle and turkey ranch. Until 1982, his partner was his eccentric brother, Elton. Elton, even as late as the early 80s, would run shows in Salem, OR and offer the tough guys on the roster an extra $25 or $50 if they would shoot early in their matches. It became one of the avowed tricks of area wrestlers to work Elton, and say they were shooting, when actually doing worked shoots to get the bonus. But there were minutes where wrestlers would on occasion shoot, and there were legendary stories where guys with tough guy reps like the Iron Sheik or The Barbarian would be stalemated by wrestlers not thought to be in their league.

While Owen's last show was in May 1992, the real death knell of the promotion came on December 10, 1991, when KPTV, Ch. 12 in Portland, announced its decision to cancel Portland Wrestling after 38 years.

At first, the shows aired live on Friday nights starting in 1954, when station officials and sponsors had to convince him to give it a try as he thought television would kill the live business. It was later moved to live in prime time on Saturday night where the TV fans would see everything except the main event, where it became an area institution. Later it was moved to a 90 minute slot, starting at 11:30 p.m., airing most of the big show of the week that would take place earlier that night. The show consisted of lengthy matches before an enthusiastic crowd of regulars, and a two out of three fall television main event. The interviews were largely to build up the next week's show, including always pushing that one of the two main events would not air on television, so you had to come to the Sports Arena to see it. Not only did he run the building every Saturday night, but once a month, they had what would be considered the area's major event, the so-called "Tuesday specials," where none of the matches would be televised. The Sports Arena had an incredibly loyal clientele. In the 70s, it was impossible to buy good tickets to the show. The first six or seven rows were permanent reservations. The wrestlers grew to recognize all the front row fans, because they were the same every week, and heels knew to insult which old women with that old lines that would get the rest of the audience going. This was no exaggeration. The only way to get good seats in the heyday was if one of the older fans were to pass away, and didn't have a family member who would pick up the reservation.

The company's biggest show in history was in 1985, when Owen moved out of the 3,000-seat Sports Arena to the Coliseum for the 60th anniversary of Owen Promotions, selling out 12,000-seats for a Ric Flair vs. Billy Jack Haynes main event. As famous in wrestling circles as he was for his longevity, it was the only crowd of 10,000 fans he ever drew. What was unique about the show is that Piper, who was probably the

second biggest star in WWF at the time and in the midst of a promotional war with WWF against everyone, worked the NWA show out of loyalty by Owen, and even got away with it. Piper in later years became an unannounced booker for Owen, helping out Lynn Denton, and sparked the territory's last hot period. It was also the period the promotion spawned what turned out to be its last major star, the son of Owen's long-time referee, Sandy Barr. Art "Love Machine" Barr played a babyface character aimed at kids called Beetlejuice, the brainchild of Piper, based on a popular movie at the time. His run ended with a rape accusation (plea bargained down to a misdemeanor charge), but it got tons of local publicity, which led to the athletic commission banning him for some time in Oregon (technically for a license violation) and the publicity later cost him his job in WCW. With his career figured to be done after being given notice by WCW, he begged Konnan, then in WCW for a brief stay, to get him into Mexico. A few years later he became the beet heel in the world while wrestling in Mexico before passing away from a drug overdose in 1994 at the age of 28.

The station made its decision to cancel the show after 34 years, which, with the exception of Houston Wrestling, was probably the single longest run of television of any wrestling show in North American history. At the time the station was paying the production costs, making it probably the only local station except WMC-TV in Memphis, still doing so. Ratings had declined since all the flashier national products were available on television as well and they were playing to a loyal older and dwindling while the younger fans were content to watch the big stars. KPTV made a deal with WWF, which provided a tape to the station for free. The station also didn't want the commitment of having its production facilities tied up every Saturday night. The other major reason was that Tom Peterson, a local appliance dealer who made himself a local celebrity through sponsoring the show dating back to the 50s and doing his hard-sell commercials live at the Sports Arena every week, filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy at the same time. Owen, in his farewell speech as a promoter five months later, noted the loss of Peterson as a sponsor as the prime thing that ended the TV run and killed the territory.

At its financial peak in the late 70s during the Buddy Rose vs. Roddy Piper feud, it was a strong regional territory that every prelim wrestler in the business wanted to get in, because you could get a chance to make a name.

Losing the TV killed the weekly towns, although even with TV, it was inevitable things were going in that direction, just as they did everywhere else in the country. Even with TV by the end, many of the cities were drawing less than 100 and even the big Saturday shows on bad nights got as low as 200, and Tuesday specials became a thing of the past. Owen continued to promote a full-time circuit for five months, but without television, crowds fell to the 75 to 100 range per night. He announced his retirement in the ring on May 30, 1992 in a tearful surprise announcement with no publicity or fanfare, calling himself "the last of the Mohicans," before just 80 fans. This ended 68 years of involvement in wrestling, which has to be some form of a record. He turned the promotion over to Sandy Barr, who was maneuvering behind the scenes to get full control, and was publicly gracious about the switch. Owen said he could no longer compete with the big boys, he had a great run, and it was time to step aside, saying, "I hope Sandy can make a go of it because I don't want to see our style of wrestling die" while the audience, largely the final few dozen remnants of the glory days, were very emotional.

Unlike most promoters, Owen didn't like publicity. He was content with local newspaper coverage with the short one paragraph item the day of the show that would list the card, as things were done in those days. Observer reader Dwight Jaynes, a long-time Portland sports columnist and wrestling fan, noted in a column this week that a few times he'd written stories about people who were down on their luck, and Owen would call him and send donations, but insisted to all that his name never be mentioned.

After his farewell, he largely stayed out of the public eye from that point forward. His hearing went bad and his wife was moved away from him to a nursing home a few years ago. His last appearance at a wrestling show was in 1995, when he was honored at a card in Portland.

In its dying days, instead of being where eventual huge name talent would be trained, the promotion largely consisted of local guys who were living in the area and just staying in the limelight while working regular jobs.